



Myles Horton,  
Highlander Folk School,  
and the Wilder Coal Strike of 1932

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Angela Smith  
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In 1932, Wilder, Tennessee, a “company” coal town in the upper Cumberland Plateau, was the site of a strike between Fentress Coal and Coke Company of Nashville and United Mine Workers Union #467, the only labor union south of the Ohio River at the time.<sup>1</sup> The strike became a crisis of hunger, injustice, and murder. This strike coincided with Myles Horton’s founding of the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. Horton, already conscious of class and labor injustice in the South, found that his exposure to the violence and inequality of the strike created a more human vision for educating Appalachian people at Highlander. Exposure to the crisis also solidified his mission, honed his compassion, and gave birth to some of his strategies for social change.

Though the civil rights movement of the 1950s brought Highlander to public attention, Horton established the school in 1932 with a mission to educate and restore human dignity and confidence to the people of the Appalachians, bringing back pride in their culture, music, and heritage.<sup>2</sup> In the 1950s, civil rights legends such as Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and Andrew Young learned the ways of non-violent protest at Highlander, but two decades earlier, poor, uneducated miners learned about self-respect and self-empowerment at Horton’s school.

Horton, the grandson of an illiterate mountain man, was born in Savannah, Tennessee, in 1905. His humble, southern, working class parents taught him about love, service, work, and the value of education. His mother had a simple, but profound,

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<sup>1</sup> Fran Ansley and Brenda Bell, “No Moanin’: Voices of Southern Struggle,” *Southern Exposure* 1 (Winter 1974): 114.

<sup>2</sup> Eliot Wigginton, ed., *Refuse to Stand Silently By: An Oral History of Grass Roots Social Activism in America* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 77.

philosophy: “God is love, and therefore you love your neighbors.”<sup>3</sup> In *The Long Haul, an Autobiography*, Horton explained the impact of her belief on his thinking: “I’ve taken this belief of my mother’s and put it on another level, but it’s the same idea. It’s the principle of trying to serve people and building a loving world. If you believe that people are of worth, you can’t treat anybody inhumanely, and that means you not only have to love and respect people, but you have to think in terms of building a society that people can profit from most, and that kind of society has to work on the principle of equality.”<sup>4</sup>

He was passionate about reading and learning from the time he was very young, even quitting the football team at Cumberland University in Lebanon, Tennessee, to have more time to read. At one of his early jobs, he performed so well his supervisor let him read when he completed his work. His thirst for understanding, knowledge, and education took him from Cumberland to Union Theological Seminary in New York City and eventually to the University of Chicago.<sup>5</sup> In the summer of 1927, between his junior and senior years at Cumberland, he directed a Presbyterian vacation Bible school program in four Cumberland Plateau counties in the East Tennessee mountains. There, in a place called Ozone, it became clear to him that the church was not meeting the needs of these country people with its memory verses and Bible stories. Since before the turn of the century, industrialists had capitalized on the natural resources of the area, mining and logging the area until the economic feast was depleted. Many residents sold their land, or its mineral or logging rights to the big companies for a fraction of its value. The people

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<sup>3</sup>Myles Horton with Herbert Kohl and Judith Kohl, *The Long Haul, An Autobiography*, (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 10.

were left without land or jobs. When Horton saw there were few options for these people to help themselves, he decided to invite the community members to come to the church one night and talk about their problems. They came with many thoughts and questions: “How could jobs be found? How does a person test a well for typhoid? Could the once beautiful hillsides ever grow trees again?”<sup>6</sup> Horton did not know the answers to all their questions, but they did not care. They helped each other. Soon they pulled in other people, like the county agent, who did have some answers. These “community meetings” were very successful and helped open up dialogue for people who were normally reticent. They tried to convince Horton to stay in Ozone. But something was brewing inside him, and he needed more information to explore his developing dream. He went back to Cumberland and then to Union to search for answers to his questions.<sup>7</sup> “I went to Union because I had problems reconciling my religious background with the economic conditions I saw in society,” Horton said.<sup>8</sup> Union was a radical school that exposed him to people and ideas that broadened his world. There he met several future associates, among them Reinhold Niebuhr, a strong advocate of the “social gospel” and a lifelong supporter of Horton and Highlander.

For Horton, the purpose of attending Union and then the University of Chicago was to “learn things that would be useful when I returned to the mountains.”<sup>9</sup> In those mountains, rich with natural resources and home to an independent thinking, culturally rich people, great conflicts existed in their quickly changing world. Disagreements arose

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Adams, with Mr. Myles Horton, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 1975), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Horton, *The Long Haul*, 35.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 46.

between landowners and the outside companies that wanted to capitalize on the minerals and between the outside companies and the workers. Understanding social change involved figuring out how to deal with the conflict. Horton began studying methods of conflict resolution. As he noted, “I wasn’t interested in resolving conflicts that would leave the same people in control and the same people powerless.” He discovered the research of sociologist Robert Park at the University of Chicago and thought it would be useful for educating people in Appalachia. In 1930 Horton went to Chicago to “see what I could learn from sociology about how to help people solve social conflicts and change society.”<sup>10</sup> There he met Jane Addams, who started Hull House in the 1880s to help the poor and new immigrants with health care, education, and cultural activities. While working at the settlement house, Horton solicited Addams’ advice on starting his “Southern Mountain School.” He wanted to know how to deal with adversaries to change. Over the course of the year they met many times, and she helped him think things through in light of her experience.<sup>11</sup>

At a folk dance in Chicago, he met Enok Mortensen and Aage Møller, two Danish-born ministers. He told them about his idea and his search for a model for his school. At their suggestion, he began reading everything he could find on the Danish Folk Schools. He thought this might be the model, but the only way to know for sure was to see for himself. He left in late 1931 for Denmark.<sup>12</sup> He first went to school in Copenhagen to learn the language and then visited the folk schools and inquired about their founding and impact on economics and society. He discovered that the founder of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 48-49.

<sup>12</sup> Adams, *Seeds of Fire*, 19-20.

the Danish Folk Schools, Bishop Grundtvig, had utilized a large piece of what Horton was seeking in his Southern Mountain School. The Danish Schools were designed as “a School for Life.” There, students studied art, music, mythology and history related to their lives and their culture. They searched for identity, but not in the standard ways; identity came from recognizing the value of the people around them and their common heritage and common future.<sup>13</sup> Having found some key answers, it was time to go back home. On Horton’s last night in Denmark, December 25, 1931, he wrote: “I can’t sleep, but there are dreams. What you must do is go back, get a simple place, move in and you are there. The situation is there. You start with this and let it grow. You know your goal. It will build its own structure and take its own form. You can go to school all your life, you’ll never figure it out because you are trying to get an answer that can only come from the people in the life situation.”<sup>14</sup>

Horton found that life situation in Wilder, Tennessee. Not only did he base his teaching and organizing on what he saw there, but also he learned lessons about people and their needs that shaped his school and the next five decades of his life. In the fall of 1932, when Horton returned to New York, the people in Wilder, Tennessee, were ready for answers to their life situation. The miners were on strike, their families were starving, and there was no end in sight. Wilder was a company coal town in Fentress County on the upper Cumberland Plateau. During this period there were hundreds of coal towns scattered along a rich bituminous coal seam through the Appalachians from Pennsylvania into West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and all the way into central Alabama. The

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<sup>13</sup> Horton, *The Long Haul*, 51-52.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

number of coal towns reflected the demands of a world dependent on coal. Coal powered the steam engines that ran the machines, ships and trains of the Industrial Revolution. Coal by-products made the iron and steel to build the machines, railroads, and buildings. Coal was used to fire the bricks to build cities and towns. Coal gas powered the lights, and families burned coal to heat their homes. “King Coal” reigned from 1876 to 1945 as the primary energy source for the nation.

Anthracite, or hard coal, burned clean with less smoke and residue than wood, though it was more rare and was expensive to mine.<sup>15</sup> Bituminous coal, soft and less efficient than anthracite, produced a black, sooty smoke and ash residue that covered everything it touched. New York, Philadelphia, and Boston were anthracite cities, and Pittsburgh, Chicago, Birmingham, St. Louis, and Cincinnati were bituminous cities. The difference was visible in the city air quality, and this was a public issue at the turn of the century. Location and transportation possibilities determined whether a city used bituminous or anthracite coal. The limited anthracite area was located in the northeast corner of Pennsylvania, and the coal there could be transported easily to the northeastern cities. Bituminous seams were scattered throughout the nation and often railroads were built or extended to take the mined coal out of remote rural areas. The demand for coal doubled every decade between 1850 and 1890. By 1900 bituminous coal was burned four times more than anthracite,<sup>16</sup> with the Appalachian Region producing 80 percent of the

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<sup>15</sup>Most of the world’s anthracite is in five counties in Pennsylvania. Barbara Freese, *Coal, A Human History*, (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2003), 112.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 137

nations' total production. According to historian Crandall Shifflett, "Appalachia became the coal bin of the nation."<sup>17</sup>

During the last part of the century, with the demand for bituminous coal increasing at astounding rates, forward-thinking industrialists saw a promising opportunity. They sent agents into the bituminous areas in search of cheap land and mineral rights. There were stories of agents taking bags of money into the mountains and purchasing land for an incredibly low price. In some cases they bought only the mineral rights, leaving the owner with the land and the tax bill, a common business practice for the industrialists' agents of the time.

The coal boom accelerated development in the Appalachian coalfields. There were logistical problems that needed to be solved such as a lack of transportation and labor. The roads into the Appalachians were inadequate for transporting much of anything; they were more dirt gullies than roads. There were no railroads in the area. Mining companies had to find adequate transportation to get the coal out to market as well as a labor pool to work these rural, inaccessible mines. Their solution to the labor problem was "The Company Town." The company towns varied throughout the region, but most were built cheaply and consisted of a commissary, barber shop, doctor's office, houses for workers, churches, and a post office. According to Shifflett, "The building of coal towns began in the 1880s, peaked in the 1920s, and virtually ended with the coming of the Great Depression."<sup>18</sup> Their solution to the transportation issue involved partnering with the railroads and getting branch lines built into the mountains.

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<sup>17</sup> Crandall A. Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 30.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 33.



Hoping the upper Cumberland coalfields with their thick coal seams might produce the next Pittsburgh, John T. Wilder, a former Union Army general, purchased the Tennessee land that became Wilder and began preparations for mining around 1902.<sup>19</sup> General Wilder was not alone in his land speculation; other mines were being bought and developed in the area, such as Alexander Crawford's mines in Crawford and Twinton.<sup>20</sup> No more than two miles separated any of the four coal towns of Crawford, Twinton, Davidson, and Wilder. Around the time General Wilder prepared to mine, the Tennessee Central Railroad built a spur line off the main Nashville-to-Knoxville rail. The spur linked the mining complex of the Crawford-Wilder area to the main line about twenty miles to the south. Rail was slow coming to the plateau because the rough terrain made it expensive to build. Jere Baxter and his Tennessee Central Railroad completed the line between Nashville and Knoxville in 1902, and by 1903 the first railroad car was ready to ship coal out of Wilder.<sup>21</sup> General Wilder sold the mine and left the area several years later. A company that later became Nashville-based Fentress Coal and Coke purchased the mine. These speculators were very successful in making huge profits on their coal and timber for the first twenty years of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup>

By the 1930s Wilder had approximately 1500 residents. The town had a company store, company office, post office, community church and about 250 frame houses for the miners and their families. Community life centered on schools and churches. The schools

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<sup>19</sup> W. Lynwood Montell, Untitled research paper, "The Wilder-Davidson Story," Archive of research materials from production, Tennessee Technological University Archives, 1987, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Crawford's mines were later purchased by Brier Hill Collieries.

<sup>21</sup> A History of Tennessee Central, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Montell. *Untitled*, 3.

were state-supported, with an elementary school and high school in Wilder. The church did not have a regular pastor in the 1930s, though the people still managed to have a service every Sunday.<sup>23</sup> The miners of Wilder were usually men from the region looking for a better life than they could sustain with subsistence farming and logging. Some miners came from other mines throughout the region. According to Fount Crabtree, a former teacher at the Wilder school in the 1930s, the men were “typical mountaineers, in all that the term indicates. Their entire life has been spent in the remote mountain area. They have had very little opportunity to attain education. Many of them have never attended school more than a few months.”<sup>24</sup>

With the coal boom and the nature of industry in the period, came attempts to unionize. The effectiveness of coal unions has always been limited by the power of the owner’s money and political connections. Though the first coal miners’ union was introduced in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1861, it took the New Deal to bring any kind of lasting worker voice to the bituminous coal industry.<sup>25</sup> This was particularly true in the slowly evolving agrarian South. In Wilder, there had been efforts to unionize before 1930. The Knights of Labor attempted to form a chapter in Crawford in 1912, but failed because the union was “loosely structured and generally ineffective as a bargaining agency. Some of the miners who were involved in trying to force compliance with President Woodrow Wilson’s eight-hour workday were blacklisted. They were forced to leave the area in search of other jobs since their companies would not permit them to

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>24</sup> Fount F. Crabtree, “The Wilder Coal Strike of 1932-33,” (M.A. Thesis, George Peabody College for Teachers, 1937) 8.

<sup>25</sup> “*A Labor History Timeline*, available from <http://online.sfsu.edu/~jdrew/web/historybib.html> accessed November 15, 2003.

return to the mines. The coal companies took the law into their own hands and refused to obey the eight-hour law.”<sup>26</sup>

Another movement to unionize came during World War I. Coal was in heavy demand for the war and operations were booming. Workers wanted shorter working hours, better pay, and the right to bargain. They got a contract that lasted until the war was over in 1919. Their success led to an increase in union membership in the Wilder area. After the war, the coal operators violated the contract, and by the time a 1921 depression hit the coal market, conditions were near what they were before the war. By 1924, the companies temporarily closed the mines to break the unions. From 1924-31 there were no unions at Wilder. To get a job in the mines, every applicant had to sign a “yellow-dog” contract in which he pledged he would never join a union.<sup>27</sup>

The 1930s, with the onset of the Great Depression, were hard for bituminous companies and miners. All three companies in the Wilder, Davidson, and Crawford area were losing money. The depression had “stopped the running of trains, the sailing of steamships, the operating of factories, and locked the wheels of industry.”<sup>28</sup> Because mass communication was seriously limited in 1930s Appalachia, the workers did not understand the big picture of the depression. Even though they knew little about the breadth of the economic crisis in the nation, they recognized their own plight. The companies had cut back work days, and, as a result, the workers’ pay was reduced to the point that they could not feed their families. In 1930, the workers organized secretly with the hope that a union would give them a voice to negotiate for some economic relief.

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<sup>26</sup> Montell. *Untitled*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>28</sup> Crabtree, *The Wilder Coal Strike*, 11.

When they had enough members, they petitioned the operators for recognition and threatened to strike if the owners failed to recognize their union. The Wilder, Davidson, and Crawford companies were intensely competitive, but they decided to work together to defeat the union. Their method was to shut down all the mines in the four communities until the workers came back without their union. Two of the mines shut down as agreed, but the third, Fentress Coal and Coke in Wilder, stayed open, shipping coal with a full staff and effectively double-crossing the other two companies. The two companies retaliated by giving the union a one-year contract and reopening under the United Mine Workers union flag in July 1931. The contract provided for no increase in wages, but it did promise not to cut wages.

The coal companies continued to struggle, as did the miners. The wages the miners were paid would have been competitive if they had been able to work five or six days each week, but they were working only three. Additionally, “take outs” like house rent, coal, lights, doctor’s fee, hospital fee, burial funds, and bath house fee, as well as blasting powder, fuses and other work-related materials the company did not cover, were deducted from their pay. This left the miners very little money to feed their families. The mining companies, however, did not heed the needs of the workers because of the dire financial situation of their mines. The companies had broken the contract and the miners took two drastic wage cuts earlier in the year. By June 1932, it was clear the mining companies were going to lowball the contract. In fact, the companies announced they were going to cut production even more. Further complicating the situation, Brier Hill Collieries, a New York-based company and the owner of the Crawford and Twinton mines, shut down permanently, leaving several hundred men out of work. The union

proposed a contract renewal with few changes from the 1931 contract. According to one report, “Throughout this period of the Union Contract the miners had run an ‘Aid Truck’ because a large number of men were not earning enough to buy their supplies and feed their families, so that they felt that to accept the new wage would put them all on a starvation basis.”<sup>29</sup> One miner remembered, “I think I was maybe making 36 cents a ton. Loading a whole ton for 36 cents. It was a toss-up. You didn’t know if you were going to win or starve to death. You was going to starve to death with work.”<sup>30</sup>

Fentress Coal and Coke would not accept union’s proposal, and offered a contract only if the union took a 20 percent cut in wages and essentially agreed to be a non-union shop. However, the union refused to accept the proposal and on July 9, 1932, began a year-long strike led by Barney Graham, a brilliant leader for the union although he was a semi-literate mountain man. “Nothing the company did seemed to break the striker’s morale, in part because of Graham,” according to Horton.<sup>31</sup>

The two parties attempted negotiations, but the mines remained closed until October 19, when Fentress Coal and Coke announced it would reopen with non-union labor, or “scabs.” The company had a hard time finding miners willing to work, and they eventually brought in miners from Kentucky, upper East Tennessee, and northern Alabama to work. To protect their imported laborers, the company hired a security force and provided them with high-powered rifles and automatic shotguns. They evicted twenty-four union families to make room for the new non-union workers. With guards in

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<sup>29</sup> “Trouble in the Tennessee Coalfields, 2/10/33,” Methodist Church, Tennessee State Museum.

<sup>30</sup> Ansley, “No Moanin’” 119.

<sup>31</sup> Adams, *Seeds of Fire*, 32.

place in and around the mines, twenty-five men, or “scabs,” showed up for work. With the “scabs” came the beginning of the violence. During the night of October 19, 1932, the coal tippie, a large, \$20,000 machine used to sort coal grades for railroad cars, went up in flames. A couple of days later, a car driven by L.L. Shivers, superintendent of the Wilder Mines, was fired upon, wounding one of his passengers. Fentress Coal and Coke filed an injunction against 104 striking miners to keep them away from the mines and the non-union laborers. Actions of this type were frequent in the next eight months.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, Horton had left Denmark in January 1932, going first to New York to outline plans for the school with his friend Reinhold Niebuhr. He proceeded to raise funds by explaining his ideas of starting a “Southern Mountain School” in letters to possible benefactors. The fund-raising was successful, and he had also secured promises from two friends, John Thompson and James Dombrowski, to join Horton in Tennessee after their graduation from Union, so he left New York with a little money and a big dream. Once in Tennessee, Horton was directed toward Don West, a native Georgian, who was also interested in starting a Folk School. They began looking for a location in the Cumberland Plateau area. An old minister friend of Horton’s from Crossville, Mr. Nightingale, knew of a possible location for the school. Dr. Lillian Johnson had a house and some property on Monteagle Mountain that might be available. Dr. Johnson was one of the first female college presidents in the country, serving as president of Western State College in Oxford, Ohio. Born to a wealthy family from Memphis, she had a doctorate in history from Cornell University. She had been a suffragist and part of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. Interested in cooperative movements, she traveled to Italy

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<sup>32</sup> Crabtree, “The Wilder Coal Strike,” 27-29

to study them, returning to her native South hoping to spread the ideas she had learned. She purchased the property at Monteagle, built a schoolhouse, and hired teachers. She offered opportunities to the community to get together at her home and talk about agriculture and community problems. But Dr. Johnson was getting older and wanted to retire to Florida. For several years she had been searching for someone to whom she could pass on her work. Horton and West went to Grundy County to talk to her. She gave them a one-year probationary lease for the house. They moved in on November 1, 1932.<sup>33</sup> The Highlander Folk School was born.

Horton heard about the strike at Wilder and traveled the one hundred miles from Grundy County to visit Wilder later in November. He discovered that the company had shut off the electricity and removed the doors from the company houses even though it was a bitterly cold winter. The Red Cross was supposed to be helping, but because the county organization's chairman was the wife of the mine superintendent, it was the strikebreakers who got the food. Horton found starving people.<sup>34</sup> After arranging for students and teachers from Highlander to support the strikers, he went back to Monteagle and began writing letters to newspapers across the state to request help for the strikers and their families. Food and clothing started coming in.

James Still, former Kentucky Poet Laureate and one of the lesser-known Fugitive writers from Vanderbilt University, wrote of his experience going to Wilder with an aid truck while in graduate school at Vanderbilt:

I spent a weekend at Wilder, Tennessee, where a strike had been in progress for more than a year. I had gone to this benighted mine camp along with two other Vanderbilt students to deliver a truckload of food and

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<sup>33</sup> Adams, *Seeds of Fire*, 26-27.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 30

clothing collected in Nashville for the strikers. I was to ride in the truck with the driver, Barney Graham, who was to lose his life in the cause later. Barney thought it an unnecessary risk as he was subject to being highjacked.

We found the people drawn and pale from malnourishment, although their resolve was strong and unshaken. They were held together by their common misery. The town was divided, the scabs living in the camp houses on one side, the strikers on the other. There was a "dead line" and one crossed it at his peril. On the strikers' side, the water and electricity were cut off. It was my first inkling that folk could starve to death in the United States of America in plain view of a largely indifferent populace. At that time the Red Cross had not yet allowed their flour to be distributed to these people.

I lodged in the home of Jim Crownover, president of the union that year, and caught "thrush," an infection of the mouth, from which his children were suffering. We attended a gathering at one of the homes after dark, blowing out the light before leaving, thus not to provide a ready target for a sharpshooter. Arriving men deposited pistols, rifles, and shotguns on a bed. The conversation was as gloomy as the light shed by a coal-oil lamp. When the meeting was over a banjo picker provided music for a bit of square dancing.<sup>35</sup>

Still's observations not only reflected the miners' struggle to pull their families up from the deteriorating conditions, but also foreshadowed the inevitable losing outcome.

Vernon F. Perry, a graduate student at Vanderbilt who wrote a thesis on the labor situation at Wilder, learned from the company doctor about the malnutrition in Wilder: "Dr. Collins, the company doctor, states last summer that there were hundreds of cases of pellagra in the general area about Wilder. There were as many cases of the dread disease among families of working miners as among those on strike. This disease is brought on by malnutrition, and Dr. Collins says it is his opinion they would not get a properly balanced diet for the simple reason that they do not know how to prepare it."<sup>36</sup> After all, most of the miners and their wives had grown up sustained by the land. They had never

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<sup>35</sup>James Still Homepage, available at <http://faculty.colostate-pueblo.edu/sandy.hudock/jssection2.html>, accessed November 15, 2003.

<sup>36</sup> Vernon F. Perry, "Labor Struggle at Wilder, Tennessee," (M.A. Thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1934), 84.



left the mountain communities for education and exposure to a life other than the hardscrabble one they had always known.

Though the living conditions for all the miners were deteriorating, the company pressed on with the non-union labor working the mines. On November 15, the company, through the efforts of its imported miners, managed to load enough coal for a shipment. The coal train that pulled out of Wilder that day was the first since July 8. The next day one of the railroad bridges was destroyed by dynamite. Over the next seven months, the “hollow,” as the locals knew it, saw violence. Union and non-union workers alike were shot at and wounded. Both company property and personal property were damaged. At this point, Governor Henry Horton called in the National Guard to protect the rail line. The presence of the uniformed guards on patrol suppressed some of the threats of vandalism to the railroad. As violence subsided, Tennessee Central Railroad officials, made an agreement with the union to ensure that railroad property would not be harmed. As a result, the National Guard departed on December 24, 1932. However, soon after their departure, riots and disorder returned, and the newly elected governor, Hill McAlister, called them back on January 6, 1933. When the troops were in the vicinity, the mines could operate at full capacity without work being slowed by unrest. With their return in January, things settled down once again and the troops withdrew on February 17, 1933.<sup>37</sup>

During the periods of violence, accusing fingers pointed in every direction. Striking miners claimed they were not shooting or blowing up things and pointed to the company as the instigator of the destruction. They argued that the company was trying to

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<sup>37</sup> Crabtree, “The Wilder Coal Strike,” 34.

sway public opinion. Of course, the companies denied the allegations and pointed at the miners. One miner remembered:

I know that the bridges were burned and blown up after the coal had been taken out. If some of the disgruntled miners were going to do such a thing, it seems to me they would have done it before, not after, the coal had been taken out.

I also know that after the mine's sub-station was blown up, they got out bloodhounds and the dogs tracked down two strikebreakers. I don't know why strikebreakers should do such a thing unless they were working with the company's private guards. You know these guards get \$5 a night, and when the trouble dies down they lose their jobs. So it's up to them to keep the trouble going.<sup>38</sup>

A Methodist Church report, "Trouble in the Tennessee Coalfields," described difficult conditions in Wilder and the tension between the company and the union at the time. The Methodist church was one of the groups that brought aid to Wilder after Horton's appeal for help went into newspapers throughout the state. The report also confirms the previous miner's statement.<sup>39</sup>

During this period, Horton was arrested and charged by a National Guard officer on one of his trips to Wilder. The guard charged him with "coming here and getting information and going back and teaching it." This was his first arrest. He was held for eight hours in Jamestown and then released. Charges against him were dropped for lack of evidence. Horton, however, had his own evidence of threats against strikers and union leadership. When he got back to Highlander he began writing to newspapers about the

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<sup>38</sup> Ansley, "No Moanin'" 119.

<sup>39</sup> "Trouble in the Tennessee Coalfields, A Methodist Church Report," "The Highlander Collection," (Nashville: Tennessee State Library and Archives).

incident. Horton was committed to getting the word out, particularly because newspapers statewide had taken a position in support of the mining companies.<sup>40</sup>

Tension in the hollow continued for several months with an occasional shooting, ambushing, dynamiting, or robbery until the night of April 29, 1933. On that night Barney Graham, Wilder union president, was shot and killed in front of the Wilder store by mine guards Shorty Green and Doc Thompson.<sup>41</sup> Horton had been aware of a plot to kill Barney Graham and remembered:

We told Barney he was going to get killed. I told him who these people were and that they were brought in to kill him. He knew they were going to kill him.

He was that tough kind that wouldn't quit, you know. So I went to work to try to get pressure to expose this before it happened, thinking that might bring enough pressure on the company and on public opinion that it might save his life. And that's what I tried – tried everything I could, put everything in the paper, the names of these guys, their history, said they were going to kill Barney Graham, and I couldn't move anybody.

That just killed me. That just killed me. That kind of thing is a traumatic experience, I tell you. You get involved with death of people, know it's going to happen, and you can't do anything about it. Society's so cruel. If I hadn't already been a radical, that would have made me a radical right then. Didn't do anything to make me less radical, I'll tell you that.<sup>42</sup>

Horton had also tried to get ministers involved and even tried to convince the governor to protect Graham. Horton and Alva Taylor, a professor of Christian ethics at Vanderbilt who had done much to help the struggling miners, had gone to Governor McAllister and presented all they knew about the threat to Graham. Horton said professional killers had been sent to kill Graham, and he had evidence that the same hired killers had murdered

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<sup>40</sup> Adams, *Seeds of Fire*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> Crabtree, "The Wilder Coal Strike," 40.

<sup>42</sup> Ansley, "No Moanin'", 129.

eleven people in an Illinois labor dispute. The governor felt no duty to protect Graham.<sup>43</sup>

Horton wrote a story for one of the labor presses predicting the death of Graham. He named the murderers and sent photographs of the “thugs.” Graham was killed a week later.<sup>44</sup>

The funeral was held in the small chapel in Wilder Cemetery, and nearly a thousand people attended. Six hundred marched from Highland Junction to the spot in Wilder where Graham died and back again.<sup>45</sup> Labor leaders, a minister, and a socialist politician spoke. According to Crabtree, the speakers “urged the striking miners to refrain from violence and to seek justice in the courts.”<sup>46</sup> The miners were affected by Graham’s death, but they were also scared about their future.

They were soon to realize their fears were justified, after they saw the outcome of the trial of Graham’s killers. Green was arrested after several days and Thompson was charged nearly a month later. Green and Thompson went on trial in midsummer for Graham’s murder. The newspaper accounts of the killing described the actions of Green as self-defense, claiming Graham was drunk and belligerent, though the evidence tells a different story.<sup>47</sup> Graham was shot ten times and had been beaten until his head split open. According to one miner:

Yeah, they tried Shorty Green. He had plenty of witnesses. He could have proved anything he wanted to. He proved in court that Barney was standing up fighting when he hit him in the head the last time. Our lawyer

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<sup>43</sup> Thomas Bledsoe, *Or We’ll Hang Separately, The Highlander Idea*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 170.

<sup>44</sup> Horton, *The Long Haul*, 40.

<sup>45</sup> Ansley, “No Moanin’,” 129.

<sup>46</sup> Crabtree, “The Wilder Coal Strike,” 42.

<sup>47</sup> *Nashville Tennessean*, Barney Graham murder

told them, “Why an elephant couldn’t have stood up under that.” Brains leaking in three places. A .45 bullet going through his lungs. Besides ten other bullet holes. But it went through. We didn’t have no witnesses there at all. Of course the whole thing was set up, the witnesses and everything.<sup>48</sup>

The violence intensified for several weeks after the funeral. The remaining union miners were evicted from their rented homes. Two hundred men and their families were now jobless, hungry, and homeless. Horton tried to find work for the miners, persuading TVA’s leader, Dr. Arthur Morgan, to hire as many miners as he could on projects in East Tennessee.<sup>49</sup> TVA was building the Norris Dam at the time. Governor McAllister made a request to the Secretary of Labor, Francis Perkins, for miners from the Wilder area to be given preference for jobs on the projects that were underway at Cove Creek near Elizabethton in upper Western North Carolina and Cumberland Homestead projects in nearby Crossville. Some found work with Works Progress Administration (WPA) or Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). President Franklin Roosevelt had been in office since January and most of these opportunities were available as part of his New Deal legislation.<sup>50</sup> The murder of Graham effectively ended the strike. After a couple of months, the hollow became quiet and the coal company, having survived the strike and broken the union, resumed operations. The strikers left to look for work in other areas.

If the miners had a sense of hope before Graham died, their hope died with him. In his autobiography, Horton addressed what he learned about hope and what the Wilder Strike demonstrated:

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<sup>48</sup> Ansley, “No Moanin’,” 130.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Crabtree, “The Wilder Coal Strike,” 54.

It made no sense to work with poor people who had given up hope. Only people with hope will struggle. If people are in trouble, if people are suffering and exploited and want to get out from under the heel of oppression, if they have hope then it can be done, if they can see a path that makes sense to them and, consistent with their beliefs and their experience, then they'll move. But it must be a path they've started clearing. They've got to know the direction in which they're going and have a general idea of the kind of society they'd like to have. If they don't have hope, they don't even look for a path. They look for somebody else to do it for them.<sup>51</sup>

The Wilder strike was a watershed for Horton and Highlander. As their first social action, the strike taught Horton and the staff about the role of newspapers, public outreach, networking, public officials, union officials, and industry in labor conflicts. They also learned it was important to learn first-hand what was actually happening. The usual channels of information were not always reliable sources for the facts of a situation. The need for educating union members in the basic skills negotiating and running a union became apparent after the strike. This was a need Highlander became qualified to meet. After the strike was over, three union miners from Wilder went to Highlander to train in union organizing.<sup>52</sup>

Horton's participation in the strike also brought publicity to the school and not all of it was good. The enemies of unionization accused Highlander of being communistic. Some of the miners were scared Horton and his staff were "red,"<sup>53</sup> so they stayed away. This hurt Highlander's effectiveness and positioned it defensively. Unfortunately, defense is a position it has had to maintain for most of its seventy years of existence.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>52</sup> John M. Glenn, *Highlander: No Ordinary School*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1996), 32.

<sup>53</sup> Methodist Church Report

The Wilder strike was also Highlander's first exposure to the real human challenges the people of Appalachia faced. Horton learned from the strike that to bring about social change in the South, Highlander would have to teach within the experiences of the people who lived there. Horton and his staff had to understand that there was a difference between what they saw as people's problems and what the people themselves saw as their problems. Horton learned that he must figure out their perception, experience, and culture in order to hear them. "When you help them to respect and learn from their own experience, they can know more about themselves than you do," according to Horton.<sup>54</sup> He also learned hungry people do not care about social change. "Our talk about brotherhood and democracy and shared experiences was irrelevant to people in Grundy County in 1932. They were hungry. Their problems had to with how to get some food in their bellies and how to get a doctor," he said.<sup>55</sup>

Highlander Folk School went on to become one of the most innovative and courageous institutions in the South. Through the labor struggles in the late thirties and forties, followed by the civil rights movement in the fifties and sixties, Highlander held fast to its vision, led by Horton, a thoughtful leader who believed in education and the greater good. According to Horton's personal philosophy, which was the foundation of Highlander, "I have a holistic view of the educative process. The universe is one: nature and mind and spirit and the heavens and time and future all are part of the big ball of life. Instead of thinking that you put pieces together that will add up to a whole, I think you

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<sup>54</sup> Horton, *The Long Haul*, 70-71.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

have to start with the premise that they're already together and you try to keep from destroying life by segmenting it, over-organizing it and dehumanizing it.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 130.



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